

# **\*\*ATTENTION\*\***

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# HISTORY OF ELK IN WASHINGTON

Washington is a very diverse state with substantial variation in habitat and wildlife. On the westside, Roosevelt and Rocky Mountain elk occupy primarily heavily forested habitats on private lands. On the eastside, Rocky Mountain elk occupy more open country with agricultural areas limiting winter range.

Elk range is shrinking in size as urban sprawl takes over former elk habitat. Washington has the highest density of elk hunters and greatest ratio of hunters to elk of any state in the west. The population density of 67 people per square mile is more than 2 times as dense as Colorado and Oregon and several times as dense as states like Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho. Human populations and hunter pressure have precipitated the need for hunter distribution programs in recent years. A number of management strategies have been implemented to prevent overcrowding and excessive harvest without limiting entry by permit. Some areas with excessive hunter pressure have already been limited to permit only hunting. If additional permit only areas are established, more hunter pressure will be directed to the remaining elk range.

Of the six subspecies of elk recognized in the United States, two are found in Washington. Roosevelt elk,

from earliest recorded time, have roamed the mountainous areas of the Olympic Peninsula, while Rocky Mountain or Yellowstone elk, as they are sometimes called, are a reintroduced subspecies in Washington. Historical records document that some of these animals were found in the Okanogan, Blue Mountains, and Yakima areas as early as the latter part of the nineteenth century.

## INTRODUCTIONS

In 1912, 186 elk were imported from Montana and released in Washington. Many apparently were killed by poachers and predators, but some of the 80 animals released near Enumclaw survived and became the nucleus of the present Mt. Rainier herd. In 1913, 121 more elk were brought to Washington from Montana. Fifty of these were released in the Naches River area of Yakima County, resulting in the Yakima-Kittitas herd today. Also in 1913 a rail car load of elk was released 8 to 10 miles east of Ellensburg. These elk form the nucleus of the Colockum herd. In Garfield and Walla Walla counties, 65 more elk were set free, to become the popular Blue Mountains herd of current times. A few elk were also released in the northeastern corner of the state in Pend Oreille County. At

various other times since that date, additional elk have been either imported or transplanted within the state, so that today there are around 57,000 throughout the western, southcentral and southeastern part of the state.

Today, Washington's elk are found in herds on both sides of the Cascade Range. Herds exist in the Olympic Peninsula; Mt. St. Helens, Willapa Hills, Mt. Rainier, Nooksack, Colockum, Yakima, Blue Mountains, and Selkirks.

## MANAGEMENT

Traditionally, the goal of wildlife agencies was production of excess animals for recreational hunting. At the present time, wildlife managers must consider views of various segments of society in management programs. This does not mean elk are not managed for hunting but that nonhunting recreational values will be considered. Wildlife management must provide stewardship of elk habitat and populations for optimal benefits to elk and society. Wildlife management policies in recent years have emphasized management of resource use rather than the biological needs of elk. This is a product of urbanization, evolution of society's views, and a lack of funds to address habitat problems.

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## HUNTING

In Washington, elk populations increased dramatically in the 40's, 50's and 60's. At the same time, elk hunter numbers increased faster than elk populations. Hunting pressure problems, primarily in the Colockum and Yakima areas, starting in the late 1960's, led to unsportsmanlike conditions during elk seasons. A number of management strategies were imposed to alleviate these problems. Opening day hunter crowding problems were addressed initially by converting from a Saturday to Monday opener (1971). In 1979, hunters were required to select one of four elk tag areas.

The Yakima area was stratified into an early and late hunt to reduce opening day crowding. Elk tag sales declined by 6,000 in 1979, partially in response to added restrictions. In 1983, the Blue Mountains area was stratified as well. Sportsman concern over

quality hunting seasons and lack of opportunity for primitive weapons hunters for bucks and bulls remained. The Wildlife Commission directed the Department to draft major changes in hunting seasons for their consideration in 1984.

Hunting season changes initiated in 1984 became known as "Resource Allocation." The cornerstone of Resource Allocation is weapon selection. A hunter has to choose one hunting method and cannot buy an additional tag for another hunting method. Other changes initiated in 1984 have been less controversial such as quality management areas and additional stratification of elk seasons.

After a 3 year review of the hunting seasons in 1986, the Wildlife Commission expressed a vote of confidence in the current hunting program. Minor modifications were made in current

hunting seasons. Washington's elk management program has been a resounding success. From a start of 10,000 elk at the turn of the century, Washington now has 52,000 elk.

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